Gunmen attack Sri Lankan cricket team in Pakistan

Tuesday, 03 March 2009
Last Updated Tuesday, 03 March 2009

By RIZWAN ALI, Associated Press LAHORE, Pakistan – At least a dozen men attacked Sri Lanka's cricket team with rifles, grenades and rocket launchers Tuesday ahead of a match in Pakistan, wounding seven players, an umpire and an assistant coach from Britain in a brazen assault on South Asia's most beloved sport. Six policemen and a civilian were killed.

The players' and the coach's injuries were not life threatening, officials said. The umpire was in critical condition. In a coordinated attack, the assailants ambushed the convoy carrying the squad and match officials at a traffic circle 100 yards (meters) from the main sports stadium in the eastern city of Lahore, triggering a 15-minute gun battle with police guarding the vehicles. None of the attackers was killed or captured at the scene, city police chief Haji Habibur Rehman said. Authorities did not speculate on the identities of the attackers or their motives. The attack reinforced perceptions that nuclear-armed Pakistan is veering out of control under militant attack and will end hopes of international cricket teams — or any sports teams — playing in the country for months, if not years. Even before the incident, most cricket teams choose not to tour the country because of security concerns. Tuesday's attack came three months after the Mumbai terror strikes that killed 164 people. Those attacks were allegedly carried out by Pakistan militants, and resembled them in many respects. Both were coordinated attacks, used multiple gunmen, apparently in teams of two, who were armed with explosives and assault rifles, carried backpacks and apparently had little fear of death or capture. Pakistan is battling a ferocious insurgency by Islamist militants with links to al-Qaida who have staged high-profile attacks on civilian targets before. Two Sri Lankan players — Thilan Samaraweera and Tharanga Paranavitana — were being treated for injuries in a hospital but were stable, said Chamara Ranavira, a spokesman for the Sri Lankan High Commission. Medical Superintendent of the Services Hospital, Mohammad Javed, told The Associated Press that a total of 15 wounded were admitted to the hospital. Among them were umpire Ahsan Raza, whom Javed said was "seriously wounded." He added: "He has got one bullet in his abdomen that has damaged his internal parts." Of the two players, Paranavitana was grazed by a bullet in the chest, and Samaraweera has a bullet wound in his thigh. Team captain Mahela Jayawardene, Kumar Sangakkara, Ajantha Mendis, Suranka Lakmal and Chaminda Vaas had minor injuries, the Sri Lankan Cricket Board said. Ranavira said British assistant coach Paul Farbrace also sustained minor injuries. Veteran batsman Sangakkara told Sri Lankan radio station Yes-FM that "all the players are completely out of danger." Authorities canceled the test match against Pakistan's national team and the Lahore governor said the team was flying home. Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa condemned the attack and ordered his foreign minister to immediately travel to Pakistan to help assist in the team's evacuation and ensure they are safe. Witness and officials said the attackers opened fire and hit the team bus with automatic weapons from several locations as it traveled to the stadium, but did not manage to stop the vehicle — something that likely saved the squad from a worse fate. TV footage of the attack showed at least one pair of gunmen with backpacks firing from a stretch of grass and taking cover behind a small monument before moving on. It was taken from a building overlooking the site of the ambush. "These people were highly trained and highly armed. The way they were holding their guns, the way they were taking aim and shooting at the police, it shows they were not ordinary people," said Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab province. "This is the same style as the terrorists who attacked Mumbai." Other video showed damaged vehicles and unexploded grenades lying on the ground along with three bodies. An Associated Press reporter saw police handling what looked like two suicide jackets. Officers also recovered two backpacks apparently used by the attackers before fleeing, as well as walkie-talkies. "It is a terrible incident and I am lost for words," said Steve Davis, an Australian who was to have umpired the match. Nadeem Ghauri, a Pakistani umpire who witnessed the attack, said the umpires were behind a bus of Sri Lankan players when suddenly they heard gunshots that lasted for 15 minutes. "Our driver was hit, and he was injured," he said. Lahore police chief Rehman said "between 12 and 14 men" took part in the assault and they resembled Pashtuns, the ethnic group that hails from close to the Afghan border, the stronghold of al-Qaida and the Taliban. He said officers were hunting them down. "Our police sacrificed their lives to protect the Sri Lankan team," he said. Haider Ashraf, another police officer, said six policemen and a civilian died in the attack. It was unclear whether the civilian was a passer-by or someone traveling in the convoy. Three hours after the attack, at least Sri Lankan eight players and team officials left the Gaddafi stadium in Lahore on a Pakistani army helicopter that took off from the pitch. Wajira Wijegunawardena, the Sri Lankan cricket board's media manager, said the team planned to board a flight to Abu Dhabi later Tuesday and return to Sri Lanka on Wednesday. Sri Lanka had agreed to this tour — allowing Pakistan to host its first test matches in 14 months — only after India and Australia postponed scheduled trips. Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona said little could be done to stop such an attack. "I think the Pakistani authorities have provided adequate security but as we know from experience ... there is never enough security to counter a well organized and determined terrorist group," Kohona said. The Dubai-based International Cricket Council condemned the attack. ICC President David Morgan told the British Broadcasting Corp. that the organization had no role in deciding on whether Pakistan was safe enough for a tour. "So long as the two countries are in agreement on safety and security, the ICC does not have a role," Morgan said. One militant group likely to fall under particular suspicion is Lashkar-e-Taiba, the network blamed for the Mumbai terror attacks in November, in which 10 gunmen staged a three-day siege targeting luxury hotels, a Jewish center and other sites. The group has been targeted by Pakistani authorities since then, and its stronghold is in eastern Pakistan. In the past, India and Pakistan have blamed each other for attacks on their territories. Any allegations like that will trigger fresh tensions between the countries, which are already dangerously high. Authorities will also consider possible links to Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger separatist rebels who are being badly hit in a military offensive at home, though Sri Lankan military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara said authorities there did not believe the group was responsible. Courtesy: Yahoo.com